

# THE PROBLEMS WITH CHINA'S XINJIANG POLICY: LINKAGES BETWEEN DOMESTIC AND EXTERNAL BEHAVIOUR

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China's foreign policy over the years has taken on an assertive attitude, but so far, it has been cautious of just how aggressive it can get. Its foreign and economic policies reflect an ambition of settling territorial disputes on its (China's) own terms and luring the neighbours into economic cooperation. But looking closely at the Chinese government's actions, inside and outside, gives a picture of an awakening leviathan. Instinctively removing what threatens it and maintaining a social appearance of minimising the counter-productive consequences. An extensive study of the internal management of the crisis in the Xinjiang region (also Tibet) paints a grey picture where China is abusing its capabilities to 'solve' problems in its favour without any regard to the root of the problem and damage done by the government. In its bid to sustain a high economic growth rate, China is ready to march on the ethnic Uighurs, forcing them to either assimilate or perish. The pattern in China's foreign and economic policies is similar, leading to a repressive domestic policy.

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**Due to their disconnect with the Chinese ideology and structure of government, China began to see the regional states as potentially destabilising for its own ethnic problem in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). It continues to regard the western neighbourhood as deeply Islamised and fears that religious sentiments travelling from the Central Asia would be a catalyst for radicalisation in XUAR.**

China has an intriguing geography, surrounded by 14 land neighbours and four maritime ones. It is argued to have the geographical characteristics of both an insular state and a landlocked one. Most of China's land neighbours are smaller, developing, relatively poor, and militarily weak. While two of the maritime neighbours are developed and wealthy, almost all of them are militarily strong.<sup>1</sup> After the end of the Cold War (dissolution of the USSR) when several new Central Asian Republics took birth, a wave of fear went up among the Chinese leadership about the unpredictability of multi-ethnic internal politics. At that time, the Chinese land borders were vulnerable and valuable<sup>2</sup>, thus, securing them was a primary and challenging task for the

government.

At the level of the state, China practises atheism and remains authoritarian (non-democratic), but the neighbours that emerged were democratic (the Russian model of democracy) republics and had a religious dimension attached at the societal level. Due to their disconnect with the Chinese ideology and structure of government, China began to see the regional states as potentially destabilising for its own ethnic problem in the

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1. The US is a major stakeholder in East Asia. Owing to the alliances forged in the region, the countries in the region rely upon the US for military security—Korea, Japan, Taiwan (also Philippines). This reflects on the strength of the region as more muscular compared with China's military power.
  2. A land border is the primary challenge for a nation to protect and manage. In international relations, land borders become valuable because stirring instability comes easier for the neighbouring nations, and detrimental for internal security, like terrorism. Today, where China has solved all its land border disputes, except with India, the value has been dissolved as no neighbouring nation has the might or reason to disturb the peaceful borders (US model of artificial insularity).

Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). It continues to regard the western neighbourhood as deeply Islamised and fears that religious sentiments travelling from Central Asia would be a catalyst for radicalisation in XUAR.<sup>3</sup>

XUAR is one of the five autonomous regions of China and is home to the Uighurs, one of the 56 ethnic minorities residing in the country. XUAR, has only a nominal 'autonomous' status and holds a strategic place in China's domestic as well as foreign policy manoeuvres. The past efforts by the government of maintaining *influence* and upgrading industrialisation in this resource rich region reflect its importance for the economy. Xinjiang also shares borders with eight neighbours, thereby becoming the lynchpin for all bilateral talks and foreign trade and policies towards these nations. But the ethnic unrest, due to several reasons, including dissatisfaction with the authorities, has led to a spiral of political mismanagement and repressive policies imposed on the province. In the strategy of 'preemptive defence', China has already undertaken 'last-measure policies' to contain and sustain Xinjiang. The geography of the region has also not permitted the government to feel secure about its frontiers. The possibility of external interference and spillover of extremism from Pakistan and Afghanistan into Xinjiang has led to an obsessive degree of control from Beijing.

A nation's geography controls its external ambitions and dictates expansion or submission. It is the neighbour's size, capability and rate of growth that decide a country's external policies: offensive or defensive/cooperative or hostile. The location of a country exposes it to the nuances involved in structuring its external/internal policies to eliminate possible threats it might face in the future. Countries like Great Britain could

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3. Andrew Scobell, Ely Ratner, Michael Beckley, "China's Strategy Towards South and Central Asia: An Empty Fortress", RAND, 2014, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR500/RR525/RAND\\_RR525.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR500/RR525/RAND_RR525.pdf). Accessed on June 12, 2015.

have a vast and expanding military and economy primarily due to the geographical bonus—sea power—coming from the absolute insularity and relative proximity. Such countries had the luxury of interacting with their far neighbours with an upper hand, resulting in offshore balancing. At that time, naval power was what gave extended arms to a country, and restricted the reach of landlocked ones like Hungary or Prussia, allowing them to concentrate only on the neighbouring state. To maintain the balance of power or tip the balance in one's favour, policies projecting self-interest remained the priority. Not to forget, the liberal structure of navigation of the seas also brought in changes in culture and a higher standard of living in society, whereas a landlocked country could only influence, and get influenced by, neighbours maintaining a 'similar' civilisational advance (for good or bad). China suffers from the insecurity of a landlocked unit much more than the security of an insular one. This insecurity reflects in its obsession with national unity and regime security.<sup>4</sup> It believes that 'a weak China will attract external hostility'. Besides, this hypothesis, being validated by the structure of the international system, also reflects the dimension that in order to survive, a nation has to accumulate the utmost power. The historical evidence would ratify China's paranoia that a weak rule at the centre brought the humiliation (from the West and Japan) on the glory of China.

China continues to project its economic might in Asia and beyond. Its struggle with the maintenance of a benign image of peaceful development and a reliable economic partner led it into compensating for the lack of trust (or gaining trust) through economic integration, viz. Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Asian Infrastructural Investment Bank, New Development Bank, Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road. The number of projects under the leadership of China and in the shadow of Chinese primary capital investment reflect a desperate need by it to improve its hierarchy in the international system and project influence in the neighborhood.

For China, as mentioned above, there is no compromise on national unity, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the People's Republic of China

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4. Ibid.

(PRC), in order to maximise the survival of the Party. Xinjiang represents a problem to which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) attaches a lot of significance, mainly on account of the persistent anti-government stand of the Uighurs. This in turn, provokes instability in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). The actions taken by the government indicate the strength and will with which it wants to assimilate and/or eliminate the separatist elements from the region. As the government has put it, “the three evils: terrorism, separatism, extremism” mirror the general tendency of Beijing asserting its interest at the cost of society and culture. What has come out of the harsh clampdown on the Uighur community is dissatisfaction, loss of trust, collapse of justice, law and order, religious discrimination and loss of life.

Beijing practised assertion (violence and violation of the International Law of the Sea) and coercion in its foreign policy for the disputed areas of the South China Sea and East China Sea. The sensitive issue of Xinjiang has been dealt with using similar brute strength, avoiding diplomacy, dismantling religious structures, prohibiting religious education and practices, blind arrests and capital punishment of Uighurs, rapid industrialisation and urbanisation at the cost of the historical heritage, influx of Han Chinese, social unrest, and rise in paramilitary and police presence. The PRC’s authoritarian government finds it rather easy to silence the opposition and march ahead with its policies despite protests.

The ideology behind the policies—domestic or foreign—brings into focus the pattern, that is, use of strength and assertion. The external policies have the primordial goal of ‘survival’. The state needs to make sure that the defence is strong and that territorial sovereignty is maintained. To confuse it with the security of the regime or a party is counter-intuitive. The domestic policies require a social understanding of the state. Different people, cultures and languages add up to the complexity of making a successful policy. As external policies can be harsh and brutal, domestic policies need to be progressive, adhering to the prescribed law and order for all, without discrimination. What the Chinese government has deduced wrong is the connection between national security and the security of the Communist Party—achieved through

tightening the law randomly for only certain groups of people, religions, ethnicity and different political ideas. Brutal domestic policies have been a sign of authoritarian and dictatorial rule. China's approach towards Xinjiang and Tibet has not been less than dictatorial. The results achieved at the external level where one nation can flex its muscle to enhance national interest, might not do justice to the results of similar policies internally. Xinjiang, being a region like Tibet, with hopes for freedom and a separate state since the beginning of the New China, has reacted with extremism and protests. The mounting dissatisfaction has led the youth into revolt. Now being treated as a terrorist organisation, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement has become much more hostile to the authorities, according to reports of incidents in the last decade. Moreover, the international community has seen the recent show trials by the authorities as devoid of a judicial structure, the spine of any functional community. Has China made assertion and coercion a tool to implement its will inside and outside its territory? It is quite evident that China will do anything to maintain sovereignty over its occupied territory, but how far will it go to do so?

### **HISTORY OF XINJIANG AND PROBLEMS WITH CHINA AT PRESENT**

Xinjiang or East Turkestan has experienced independence as well as invasions. The Qing Dynasty completed the annexation of what is now Xinjiang in 1759 and the demand for freedom was first documented in 1865 by Yakub Beg, a local leader.<sup>5</sup> The Uighurs enjoyed a brief period of statehood in 1931-34, declaring the East Turkestan Republic, extending from the Tian Shah mountains to the Kunlun mountains. And then again, in 1944-49, when China grew weaker owing to its involvement in its civil war. It was six years after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, under Chairman Mao Tsetung, that the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region was created, with ethnic Uighur Muslims comprising the majority.<sup>6</sup>

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5. Chien-peng Chung, "China's 'War on Terror': September 11 and Uighur Separatism", *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2002, <http://www.cfr.org/china/chinas-war-terror-september-11-ughur-separatism/p4765>. Accessed on June 12, 2015.

6. Joshua Hammer, "Demolishing Kashgar's History", *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 2010.

The PRC had declared itself a “multi-ethnic state founded jointly by the people of all ethnic groups.”<sup>7</sup> But the Anti-Rightist Policy of 1957 not only opposed local nationalism but also took harsh steps to clamp down on religious activities. Later, in Mao’s regime, religion was prohibited in totality, including the ethnic language, culture and attire, in an attempt to bring ‘equality’ among the people, one among the several crises faced by China during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76).<sup>8</sup> In the past two decades, the region has witnessed its ancestral homes, mosques and religious texts being destroyed. At present, religious gathering are prohibited in the region for fear of these being construed as disguised terrorist meetings.

Xinjiang has suffered political assassinations, bombings and riots, resulting in the death of hundreds of Uighurs and Han Chinese. According to news reports, there were approximately 200 attacks between 1990 and 2001, causing over 500 casualties (380 in 1998 alone). From 2008-14, there were over 100 incidents of violence, claiming more than 500 lives (Uighurs and Han Chinese; policemen and locals). The worst of the events include the 1997 pro-independence uprising, in which 100 people were killed in the town of Yili; the January 2007 Chinese raid on a training camp in Xinjiang that killed 18 terrorists and one policeman; the 2009 Shaoguan toy factory incident, that left 100 dead and 400 injured, leading to the shutdown of the internet in the entire Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, the Kunming knife incident, and the 2013 Tiananmen Square attack. It can be debated whether the attacks have decreased after the “strike hard” campaign by China, but the protests and violence seem to be a daily occurrence in the region and the violence by the Uighurs outside the region has also increased, resulting in more strident policies from the government. The statistics might be flawed due to the lack of communication with the outside world but the problems seem to have grown another dimension where the government has decided to “contain the situation by threat, coercion and lawlessness.” There has been an increase in mass shootdowns and public

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7. Office of State Council, *National Minorities Policy and Its Practice in China*, September 1999, Part 1 A. Also see Elizabeth Van Wie, “Uyghur Muslim Ethnic Separatism in Xinjiang, China”, Asia Pacific Centre for Security Studies, January 2008.

8. Van Wie, *Ibid.*

**The belief that economic development would undermine the nationalistic uproar and help Beijing find a solution to its Xinjiang problem led to further destruction of the Uighur legacy.**

executions in the region. In May 2014, the Chinese government reined in another episode of 'terror' among the Muslim community by having a mass 'show trial' in a football stadium with about 7,000 spectators. About 55 Uighurs were sentenced for separatism, extremism and terrorism—the three evils. The sentencing took place in Yili, a city bordering Kazakhstan.

The belief that economic development would undermine the nationalistic uproar and help Beijing find a solution to its Xinjiang problem led to further destruction of the Uighur legacy. The

*hutong* (traditional courtyard residences), the cultural property and heritage of the city of Beijing, were destroyed one after the other, to construct modern apartments, leaving only a few for viewing by tourists. The old city of Kashgar is facing a similar fate where centuries old houses and mosques have been brought down to dust and the government plans to "reform" about 85 percent of the city under the "Kashgar Dangerous House Reform" programme for which it has allocated US\$ 500 million.<sup>9</sup> In the wake of expanding China's economic power, the current president has launched the "Silk Road Economic Belt" programme. But in the disguise of progress, the government has been destroying the ancient Silk Road city of Kashgar. The Uighur population which already suffers from the ongoing human rights violations and denial of appropriate political representation, has been undergoing the trauma of dislocation from their homes. Even after several requests from the United Nations Human Rights Council, and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the Chinese government continues with its plan.

The region, historically, was crucial for merchants, travellers, writers and conquerors. For example, Kashgar, 'an oasis', is a key city of Xinjiang,

9. European Parliament resolution of March 10, 2011, on the situation and cultural heritage in Kashgar (Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, China) <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/document/activities/cont/201103/20110322ATT16076/20110322ATT16076EN.pdf> Accessed on June 12, 2015.



bordering Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and is the westernmost part of China. In the ancient times, the trade along the Silk Road went through the city and connected China's Yellow river valley with India and the Mediterranean. Today, the region presents the same geo-political and strategic advantage for China. It has borders with eight countries: Russia, India, Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Kazakhstan. Naturally, the region is the way for China to tap into the Central Asian countries for resources, political influence and power.

In the initial years of the Chinese economic reforms, the focus remained on trade, and because the eastern region already had established systems of trade and navigation, further investment fast tracked the growth and development. But the west stayed unreachable, backward, poor and detached from China proper. It was only a few decades ago, when China had exhausted the available resources, plus, the growing unrest in the region prickled its ambition of political stability, that Xinjiang presented a golden opportunity to revive the (falling) growth rates and continue strong action against any anti-establishment activities which might disturb the precarious balance between the people of China and their trust in the CCP.

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### **CHINA'S XINJIANG POLICY: THE THREE EVILS**

China's land border disputes on the western front have been resolved over time and with due efforts. Just like the US managed to dilute the threat from the land borders, China has also adopted a similar approach for its western region, which has been 'wild', and historically unstable. This is not to say that the borders are free from national security challenges but territorial disputes which hamper external affairs and partnerships between nations, have been done away with.

China has conceptualised the evils of its society as terrorism, separatism, and extremism, calling them “the three evils”. The tendency of the Chinese

government is to come out with catch phrases to get popular support and give a benevolent yet firm face to the actions of the government to remedy the shortcomings. Terrorism can be defined as an act of “the unofficial or unauthorized use of violence and intimidation in the pursuit of political aims”, as opposed to separatism, “the advocacy or practice of separation of a certain group of people from a larger body on the basis of ethnicity, religion, or gender” and extremism, “the holding of extreme political or religious views”. Firstly, the Uighurs’ violence stems from their desire for a separate state, which might also be defined as an ‘independence struggle’ or ‘revolution’. Secondly, extremism is dangerous in nature as it calls for extreme measures like ‘*jihad*’. Contrary to this, the social stability of the region is tipped in favour of the Han Chinese (foreigners) against the Uighur majority. The people who have been residents of the place for centuries, are now being denied their basic right to practise their faith, as per the government orders. There is obviously a grey area here, wherein people are using violence to achieve a political goal—independence – which is being denoted as terrorism by the Chinese government. However, it is also called a fight for freedom. In order to make the distinction, the government should investigate deeper into the roots of the problem which might lie in dissatisfaction due to improper governance. In a Radio Free Asia interview, the leader of the East Turkestan Liberation Organisation (ETLO), Menmet Emin Hazret stated, “Our principle [*sic*] goal is to achieve independence for East Turkestan by peaceful means. But to the show our enemies and friends our determination on the East Turkestan issue, we view a military wing as inevitable.”<sup>10</sup>

The Uighur community, once in an independent state, still struggles to find its resolution with the government. More importantly, it strives for a non-interventionist government which honours its promise of an ‘autonomous’ region. Falling short of such claims, China has taken quite a dramatic stand to include Xinjiang in the mainland’s spectrum of growth, industrialisation and wealth. The three evils have brought the three aspects of the government together—diplomatic, economic, military. The

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10. “Separatist Leader Vows to Target Chinese Government”, *RFA*, January 29, 2003.

connection among the three often can be observed as lost, due to the lack of understanding of the region. In the new administration, Xinjiang had exploded with protests against the new policies that labelled Uighurs as terrorists, and the imposition of several discriminating religious and social laws against them. As a result, this has instigated social unrest between the Hans and Uighurs in the region.

Xinjiang is one of the most valuable territories for its natural resources and strategic location. But the defence structure is lax due to the concentration in the eastern region—the wealthiest and most heavily populated—making it the heart of the Chinese economy. In the growing environment of violence in the region, China has adopted certain policies to fix the lack of governance and law and order in the region. First, the economic boost: in the backdrop of growing dissatisfaction among the people of the region, the government has decided to bring in economic growth through industrialisation which, in turn, will provide employment, stability and a higher standard of living. But the officials have opted for hiring the Han Chinese as workers, once again increasing the gap with, and dissatisfaction among, the ethnic groups. The high influx of Han Chinese is only making the situation worse as most of the jobs are given/taken by the Han Chinese; this is one of the reasons why the Uighurs feel invaded in their own land. In an attempt to minimise the ethnic dimension of the Uighurs and assimilate them with the Chinese mainland, the authorities have also banned their language, imposing instead English and Mandarin. As a result, the Uighurs are losing out on employment, tradition and culture. According to the British journalist Christen Tyler, author of the *Wild West China: The Taming of Xinjiang*, “The people in charge are Han, and they recruit Han. Natural resources—oil and gas, precious metals—are being siphoned off for the benefit of the Han”.<sup>11</sup>

Second, economic incentives comprise the largest, and a tried and tested tool in the hands of the central government—the Western Development policies. The rapid industrialisation has forced the people to move from their centuries old homes. There has been wanton destruction of old houses, which represented the cultural heritage and history of the Uighurs, for

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11. Hammer, n.6.

constructing industrial complexes or apartments. The lack of reasoning for this and lack of involvement of the locals encouraged rebellion and protest. The belief that people want a prosperous life, although true, has not been conveyed in the process.

Third, China has connoted religion (Islam) with terrorism, like several other nations before it. Due to its proximity to Afghanistan—"the epicentre of terrorism"—and Central Asia, China sought to clamp down on all religious activities, from praying and education to dressing and physical appearance. Not allowing the majority living in the region to practise their faith has also forced the Uighurs to fight for the independence which they now regard as the only way to survive. In the most recent event, China banned the locals from observing fasts during *Ramadan* in Xinjiang<sup>12</sup>. When the Foreign Minister of the PRC, Tang Jiaxuan, claimed in a telephone conversation with his Russian counterpart Igor Ivanov on October 10, 2011, that China was also the victim of terrorism by Uighur separatists..., he fused the meaning of terrorism with separatism. By defining all separatist activity in Xinjiang as terrorism, the government of the PRC is hoping to obtain *carte blanche* from the international community to take whatever action it sees fit in the region.<sup>13</sup>

As is clear, the policies have not yet yielded the result that was hoped for. There has been an increase in police raids and arrests, and in violence by the rebels. Now, as China has started to bring much more money into the region, it also wants assimilation and 'national integration'.

## WAR ON TERROR: CHINA'S THREAT PERCEPTION

China has been rocked by protests and demonstrations for larger political involvement, democracy, independence and autonomy from all sides in the past few decades in Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong and in the mainland, for the policies of the centre deemed to be against the people. It was after 9/11,

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12. "China Bans *Ramadan* Fasting in Mainly Muslim Region", *Al Jazeera*, June 18, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/06/china-bans-ramadan-fasting-muslim-region-150618070016245.html>. Accessed on June 12, 2015.

13. Michael Dillon, "Xinjiang and the 'War against Terror': We Have Terrorists Too," *The World Today* 58:1 (2002), quoted in McMillen, "China, Xinjiang, and Central Asia," [http://connections-qj.org/article/xinjiang-chinas-foreign-policy-toward-central-asia#\\_edn26](http://connections-qj.org/article/xinjiang-chinas-foreign-policy-toward-central-asia#_edn26). Accessed on June 13, 2015.

when the US launched its War on Terror, seemingly the largest national security threat in decades that shook the nation and the world alike, that many nations came aboard in the fight against terrorist organisations largely operating from Afghanistan and areas nearby. As China had looked upon the pro-independence movement by the Uighurs in Xinjiang as an act of terror, it immediately persuaded the US to declare the East Turkestan Islamic Movement a terrorist organisation. China acknowledged this step as permission by the international order to “crack down” on the Uighur separatists. The number of protests and violent attacks have increased as have the arrests and killings by the government. Urumqi and Kashgar became the centre for the violence. Since 2008, several attacks have been conducted on buses, police stations and local markets, killing the locals. The worst attack took place in July 2009, in a toy factory in Guangzhou, where the workers (Han Chinese) attacked other workers (Uighurs) in response to a fake video, killing about 132 Uighurs. This event had a trickle-down effect, with riots breaking out all over Xinjiang, resulting in the government shutting down the internet in the region in an attempt to contain, and disconnect it from the outside world. Countless police raids, clamping down on religious gatherings, teaching schools and houses were organised, to harden the grip on ‘illegal’ practices.

China has tried to equate its battle with the separatists in Xinjiang with the US’ fight against Al Qaeda. As some Uighurs have chosen to express their dissatisfaction with the regime in a violent manner—burning police stations and attacking policemen—China feels it has the moral authority for eliminating the unwanted elements, which is also made officially reasonable. Maintaining the order of the state is one of the primary tasks of the government, but in practice, policy-makers seemed to have missed the point—striking down on ‘own people’ (not an organisation or individuals or groups), without distinction between innocent and culprit, is not going to legitimise the concerns of ‘national security’. The threat perception by China has often led policies astray, ignored, and at the mercy of local officers often affected by the ethnic stereotypes.

Terrorism is a real threat for the world and the Chinese do not want to let it become real in their sphere. The Islamic militant rhetoric is feared to have

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found its way in Xinjiang through the connection with Afghanistan and the funding for militancy. But how live is the threat? As argued above, the root of the problem lies in the geographical, cultural and historical distinction between China and XUAR. But today, as it has transformed into a civil-political movement, unaccepted by China, the three evils can be perceived as a fabricated phenomenon to force assimilation and justify

the coercion in the international view. Soon after outlining generous and open policies towards the minorities in 1999, China undertook a large scale exercise of parading military artillery and hardware on the streets of Kashgar in 2001.<sup>14</sup> The parade was a symbol of strength and force, demonstrated to deter the people from protesting against the government or the Party. It was also at this time that the diplomatic, military and economic influence of China increased exponentially. China's economic agenda is clear – to keep Xinjiang engaged in economic prosperity and eliminate the elements of terrorism. But how is the region detrimental for the foreign policy? Keeping in mind the huge investment by China in terms of both finance and diplomacy, Central Asia has much more to offer than just security in the western part of China.

### **GEOGRAPHICAL DILEMMA AND GEO-POLITICAL STRATAGEM**

The western part of China has had geographical issues, contrary to what one might deduce as its natural advantages—it is blessed with vast deserts, plateaus, untamed mountains in the north and west, and a vast sea in the east. But for most part of its history, China has suffered from constant attacks from the north, west, and east in major events – thrice being defeated and occupied [13th and 17th centuries – Yuan (1271-1368) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, Japan in 1894-85 occupied Taiwan, and in 1937-45, it occupied Shanghai, Beijing and Nanjing]. The warriors and nomads from Tibet and Mongolia constantly threatened the Chinese regimes, resulting in the most

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14. Van Wie, n.7.

visible remedy—the Great Wall—for such threats.

The region is a resource paradise and provides geo-strategic depth to China. In 2009, Xinjiang ranked third in oil production and is estimated to have 30 percent of the country's oil reserves. The region has about 34 percent of the country's natural gas reserves, and 40 percent of its coal reserves. There are significant reserves of non-ferrous metals—copper and nickel. In addition to the above, Xinjiang can also tap vast amounts of wind and solar energy.<sup>15</sup>

Gen Liu Yazhou, the political commissar in 2010, wrote<sup>16</sup>:

Western China is a vast empty expanse [*yi ge weida de kongjian*]. Moreover, our strategic direction should be westward... With an excellent geographic location (close to the center of the world), the western region can provide us with the driving force to build our strength. We should regard western China as our hinterland rather than as our frontier.

Even though China is the second largest economy in the world and a powerful military, it still remains insecure due the disturbances in Xinjiang. China's foremost objective since independence has been to maintain the *legitimacy of the (Communist) Party* (which then transcends into the authority of the government) and then *national security*. The conflation of the two derails the understanding of national security in general. For the Chinese government and the Party, it is of utmost importance to not let the regime

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15. Scobell, et al., n.3.

16. Liu Yazhou, "Xibu lun Theory on the Western Region," *Fenghuang Zhoukan Phoenix Weekly* (Hong Kong), August 5, 2010, p. 36.

be questioned, stained, doubted or even become part of public debate. Because an act of protest or disagreement with the government or the Party might dilute the authenticity of the regime and cause unrest in the heartland, China is determined to quash any political dissent. Secondary to this is the problem of *national unity* which is the core of the domestic policy towards the autonomous regions (Tibet and Xinjiang). The fight for greater autonomy and a separate homeland by the Tibetans and Uighurs represents the weak link between the centre and the periphery.<sup>17</sup> Here, a prominent threat to China is the link-up between the internal challenges and the external threats.<sup>18</sup> For China, its periphery represented “an unpredictable zone from which Turkic nationalism and Islamic ideologies could radiate into Xinjiang.”<sup>19</sup>

But today's China is stronger, wealthier and much more peaceful than it has ever been in centuries. Although a contingency is still hampering its objective to achieve overall economic growth and political stability—Xinjiang—China has maintained tough control and surveillance.<sup>20</sup> This strength has not helped China in solving the dispute in a mature manner. In fact, the government has relied upon violence, political and judicial injustice and strongly repressing the people. The numerous episodes of arrests and disappearances of Uighur men, lack of transparency in the judicial procedures, show trials and strict surveillance and raids on the people have created a wide gap. This gap can become a geo-political burden for China. The militants in the nearby region have tried to consort with the smaller and less threatening outfits of Xinjiang by training them and providing them arms. It is obvious that China wants to maintain influence in the region. To dilute the sense of national boundary in order to expand

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17. Besides both regions' separate history and the deeper sense of nationality, the problem technically represents the lack of capability by China to solve these issues, peacefully and completely.

18. Scobell, et. al., n.3.

19. Lena Jonson, “Russia and Central Asia,” in Roy Allison and Lena Jonson, eds., *Central Asian Security: The New International Context*, Brookings Institution and Royal Institute for International Affairs (2001), p. 17. See also Scobell et. al., n.3.

20. \* The Tibet Autonomous Region has been deliberately left out in the study. It does add up to the economic and political troubles faced by China but this paper looks precisely at the Uighur problem and threat of terrorism.



cooperation and alliances, it is essential to reduce the tension not only for the stability of the region but also for the future national security or foreign policy advancement. China needs to measure its power in order to maintain a favourable position in the region. The units affecting the policies of China are: Central Asia, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the US.

## **EXTERNAL CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS ON FOREIGN POLICY**

### ***Central Asia***

After the end of the Cold War and disintegration of the Soviet Union, a number of small and new states came into existence. The impact of this change threatened China's already distant west to further relate with the newer and unstable states as they shared the religion, culture and language. Due to the close proximity of Central Asia and Xinjiang, China did take a proactive stand in maintaining strong relations with these governments. But the dissatisfaction among the Uighur community with China's Communist Party and the government ran deep as the Uighurs never gave up the demand for a sovereign nation established on the basis of different ethnicity, culture and language from those of proper China. Today, Beijing's Xinjiang policy is equivalent to its Central Asia policy, viz. to maintain peace and influence, promote economic interests and energy security. China, as of 2010, surpassed Russia as Central Asia's top trading partner. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) founded to address non-traditional security threats, has proved fruitful in only promoting economic interests without devising a concrete method of tackling the problem of terrorism. The SCO reduced the importance of Russia in favour of China. With the large amount of financial aid provided to the countries, China has found its way to wave off the other powers from the scene.

### ***Pakistan***

In December 2000, the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan met with Taliban leader Mullah Omar, to insist that the Taliban not support the Uighur militants in Xinjiang in exchange for Chinese support for Afghanistan in the United Nations. The attempt was unsuccessful, but Xinjiang

has created a dent in the 'all-weather' friendship. Pakistan has irked Beijing over the most pressing domestic security concern—terrorism—stemming from the grievances of China's Uyghurs. Pakistan has failed to contain the problem emanating due to the lack of policing. A few dozen Uighur militants have been reported to dwell around the tribal areas of Pakistan, forcing the Chinese government to wonder "why the Army has not simply eliminated them"<sup>21</sup>, although in 2003, the Pakistani forces had killed Hasan Mahsum, the founder of the Uighur East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). A closer look at the friendship of China and Pakistan suggests that the balance of power strategy is at play to contain India. The threat of terrorism for China has led it into maintaining a strong presence but as a trickle-down effect, China has engaged actively, stretching its soft power <sup>22</sup> and directly or indirectly, expanding into the subcontinent region, too close to India—the only country capable of absorbing the China threat: its economic potential, population, landmass and military power.

### *The US*

Beijing feels vulnerable in western China in part because of the threat of terrorism. But it also feels extremely vulnerable on its western flank because of the US military forces that are engaged in battling this common threat. As and when the US moves out, there is going to be an inevitable gap, and as China's strategy so far suggests, '*first economic cooperation, second military assertion*', it is likely that Beijing would want to fill the gap. In the backdrop of the policy of 'rebalancing to Asia', Afghanistan can become a pivot for radiating China's power. The US, in view of the ambition to leave behind a peaceful and democratic Afghanistan, would ignore the dramatic presence of China in Central Asia, much more than Russia, and the geo-political importance of the country. China, as it eyes Afghanistan, would need to pursue this objectively and without the inhibition of terror in Xinjiang.

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21. "Corridor of Power", *Economics Times*, April 20, 2015.

220 Soft power here essentially means economic and cultural power as opposed to traditional military capability resonating in hard power.

### A MIXED STORY AND THE WAY AHEAD

It is evident from the functioning of the current administration that President Xi Jinping believes in the projection of power both outside and inside the country. His recent moves of anti-corruption, assertion in the South and East China Seas, and actions against people spreading awareness and political dissidents alike throw light on the universal strategy of governing and government.

- **Peaceful Development:** China's doctrine of peaceful development revolves around non-violence, with the exception to the 'threat to its core interests' namely Tibet, Taiwan, South China Sea and East China Sea. Xinjiang has not yet found its place in the list but the internal development of Xinjiang has yielded neither peace nor development.
- **Xi Jinping** stated, "Always put people's life first", and recommended a "holistic view of national security" when internal security is damaged by strenuous actions taken by the government itself. The rhetoric of the rule of law fails every time China arrests and tries Uighurs without a proper judiciary and adhering to judicial practices. The whimsical vacillation in law and order has put China's integrity towards its own people at stake. It seems like China considers its responsibility to be towards the mainland and the economic belt on the east coast only.
- **Chinese Dream:** To replay the American success story, China would need to mend its economic ideology – from state capitalism (crony capitalism) to a free market (even if not absolute). The Chinese dream falls short of a realistic vision wherein people can benefit equally from the market and hope for the government to protect 'individual rights'—a concept alien to the Chinese but the fundamental on which America was built.

In the recent events, it has become apparent that the current regime of President Xi Jinping follows hardline policies in every aspect of policy making: domestic, economic, defence and foreign. The Chinese society model was defended as providing all that a society needs: societal freedom, economic freedom, et al. However, it has been noticed from time to time that civil society is getting crushed under this regime. As many as a thousand

protestors were detained last year. Any kind of political debate or discussion in the society has always troubled China. But for a while now, it has been observed that the 'law' is gripping the civil society harder than is legitimate or necessary, e.g. a couple of female activists were arrested for spreading awareness about the rights of women as independent individuals and against sexual harassment. They were arrested on the basis of disrupting public order. Such belligerent policies have made their way into the lives of the Chinese that are devoid of any kind of freedom that was assumed to be present, a reason due to which political freedom could not become a priority.

China would not want the Uighur community outside of China to get attention and act like to the Tibetan government-in-exile, maligning its reputation, forcing debates over violations of humanitarian rights, and interference by the world's other governments. It is important to contain the matter with the use of comprehensive tools of diplomacy. The urge for an independent nation can be curbed by economic prosperity and better living standards but these concepts are not the same for every culture. Preservation of its heritage and maintenance of its legacy are important to a community which is part of an alien community. In this battle for recognition, China must adhere to the promises made at the time of proclaiming Xinjiang an autonomous region.